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ABSTRACT

While most primary school education in Hong Kong (China) is in the native language, Cantonese, and most university-level instruction is conducted in English, the language of secondary school instruction has begun to shift from English to Cantonese. The decision to increase Cantonese use is controversial. Four studies of this situation are reported. The first, a study of 56 secondary schools, found Chinese-medium classes less passive. The second, a survey of 189 Chinese-medium schools, found most principals and slightly fewer teachers believed native-language teaching facilitated higher-level learning. The third study, of grade 7 students in 12 secondary schools found the Chinese-medium students felt their English had improved more than did the English-medium students. The fourth study, consisting of in-depth interviews with students, found Chinese-medium students to be more comfortable in class. Further examination of the studies, not yet available in full, and further research on native language-medium instruction in this and other contexts are recommended. Contains 11 references. (MSE)

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Implementation of Mother-Tongue Teaching in Hong Kong Secondary Schools: Some Recent Reports

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Introduction

While most primary school education in Hong Kong is in the mother tongue (Cantonese) and most university level education involves a considerable amount of English, until 1997 a great deal of secondary education was in English (see table). As is well known, this has recently changed.

Table 1
Language of Instruction in Hong Kong Schools, 1960-1997 and after 1997

School Level	Language of Instruction	1960-1997 (%)	After 1997 (%)
Primary	English medium	5-10	Less than 10
	Cantonese medium	90-95	Greater than 95
Secondary	English medium	60-90	25
	Cantonese medium	10-40	75
University	English medium	80-86	86
	Cantonese medium	14-20	14

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Starting with the 1998 school year, 307 government and government-aided secondary schools in Hong Kong were required to adopt mother-tongue teaching, while 114 schools were allowed to continue

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with English-medium instruction because of their previous high achievement (Hong Kong Department of Education, 1997; Tsui, Shum, Wong, Tse, & Ki, in press). (Chinese-medium schools use Chinese as the medium of instruction except for English language class, while English-medium schools use English as the medium of instruction in all subjects except Chinese language, Chinese history and Chinese literature.)

The decision to increase the use of Cantonese has been controversial. The desire for English remains strong, with many assuming that using English as the medium of instruction will result in higher English competence, considered to be very valuable. The *Christian Science Monitor* reported that "students have protested, school councils have threatened lawsuits, and parents have been burning up the telephone lines to complain" (Crowell, 1998). The Hong Kong Department of Education defended its decision, claiming that "educational research worldwide and in Hong Kong [has] shown that students learn better through their mother tongue," and that students in Chinese-medium classes have outperformed those in English-medium classes in both Chinese and English on the Hong Kong Certificate of Examination (Hong Kong Department of Education, 1997, p. 1).

We do not yet have access to details, but one newspaper report has appeared about the progress students have made after one year under the new system. *Ming Pao*, published in Chinese, reported the results of four studies on July 9, 1999.

Study 1 was a study of 56 secondary schools, and was conducted by the Education Department of Hong Kong. Researchers reported that students in English-medium-instruction (EMI) schools were more passive than those in Chinese-medium schools, typically limiting their verbal responses to short phrases and even single words. In contrast, in the Chinese-medium schools observed, students were active and occasionally creative in class discussions.

Study 2 was conducted by Amy Tsui, professor and head of Curriculum Studies, University of Hong Kong. Professor Tsui surveyed 189 Chinese-medium schools and reported that, after one year of teaching in the mother tongue, 80% of the principals and 70% of the teachers believed that mother-tongue teaching facilitated higher-level learning for students.

Study 3 was conducted by the Caritas Community Center-Kowloon and investigated Form 1 (grade 7) students in twelve secondary schools in Kowloon City, Hong Kong. About fifty percent of the Chinese-medium students felt that their English had improved after one year, while only 25% of the English-medium students felt the same way. A report in the *Singtao Electronic Daily* (July 7, 1999) provided additional information about this study: those in Chinese-medium instruction said they understood English as well as those in English-medium instruction, and the former understood more in other subjects.

Study 4 was done by the Boys and Girls Association in Hong Kong and consisted of in-depth interviews with students. There was a striking difference in attitude between English- and Chinese-medium students.

> Quoting one English-medium student: "I am very unhappy. For the past half year, I didn't understand what was taught in class. I only sat there and felt very pitiful. I wanted to listen but I didn't understand what the teacher said."
>
> Quoting one Chinese-medium student: "There is such a happy learning atmosphere in the class — lots of jokes and discussions" (C.Y. Lao, trans.)

(Cheung, 1999).

Conclusion

In spite of the initial opposition from parents, students, teachers and administrators a year ago, findings from the above studies appear to show that mother-tongue teaching has provided a positive, non-threatening learning environment for students, and the feeling that they are making progress in English. Students in Chinese-medium programs appear to be more active, appear to learn more subject matter, enjoy school more, and are improving in English.

It is tempting to conclude that Chinese-medium instruction has been a success, a conclusion that is certainly consistent with the position that education in the primary language benefits cognitive development and can contribute to second language acquisition. This conclusion, of course, awaits detailed examination of these four reports when they become available.

If Chinese-medium instruction is successful, an interesting question arises: Why should second-language-medium instruction work in some cases but not in others? English-speaking Canadian students in French-medium programs clearly acquire more French than those in English-medium programs who have far less exposure to French.

Discussion at this stage clearly runs the danger of explanation proceeding too far in advance of the data, but it may be useful to speculate. While English-medium students encounter more English, it may be the case that the English encountered by those in Chinese-medium programs is more comprehensible (Ho, 1992; Tsui, 1992). While it has been established that teaching subject matter in a second language is very effective for second language acquisition when it is comprehensible (Krashen, 1991), subject matter input at the secondary level is complex and thus difficult to make comprehensible for those with limited proficiency (Gibbons, 1982). Also, English input for those in Chinese-medium programs may be more comprehensible because of background knowledge gained through the mother tongue.

In addition, second-language-medium instruction may be more successful in Canada because students in these programs are primarily middle class, while in Hong Kong this is not the case. Middle class students typically live in more print-rich environments and thus develop higher levels of literacy in their primary language along with more subject matter knowledge, which is a tremendous help in making second language input more comprehensible (Krashen, 1996).

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